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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001626

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: RULING AKP AIMING HIGH IN MARCH 2009
LOCAL ELECTIONS, WHILE FIGHTING CORRUPTION CHARGES

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

11. (C) Summary and comment: Showing signs of the political prowess that led to its political dominance, Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) is astutely gearing up for March 2009 local elections well before its opponents. AKP hopes to demonstrate it is "the party of all Turkey" by increasing the number of women in elected office and capturing the as-yet unconquered cities of Izmir, Trabzon, Mersin, Diyarbakir, and the Cankaya sub-municipality of Ankara. Foreshadowing a tense political season, opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) are seeking to discredit AKP at every opportunity, most recently by spotlighting incidents of alleged corruption. Erdogan has proved politically astute by recently sidelining one of his key advisors linked to a bribery scandal, and may be able to temporarily deflect accusations of corruption and reduce uncertainties about his commitment to secularism by carrying out a rumored cabinet reshuffle. Silencing criticism in the longer term will require him to control his combative instincts and muster the political will to carry out genuine legislative reform, a difficult challenge given the opposition's commitment to stonewalling. End summary and comment.

AKP Eyeing Key Cities In March 2009 Local Elections

12. (C) AKP Vice Chairman for Local Administration Huseyin Tanriverdi told us AKP seeks to demonstrate in March 2009 local elections that AKP is the party of all Turkey. Though AKP currently has MPs from 80 out of 81 provinces, it has not been able to capture five significant municipalities: Izmir, Trabzon, Mersin, Diyarbakir, and the Ankara sub-municipality of Cankaya. Tanriverdi is screening potential candidates for these cities based on their political track records, ability to convey AKP's "world perspective," and ability to work cooperatively with local constituencies and civil society. Tanriverdi believes if AKP selects viable candidates, the party's superior track record on provision of municipal services will give it credibility among voters in each municipality. AKP will announce its candidates by mid-December, according to Tanriverdi. The Supreme Election Board will convene on January 1, at which time campaigning may begin.

13. (C) AKP Women's Auxiliary President Fatma Sahin, just back from a trip to Diyarbakir to rally AKP's female members there, told us AKP hopes to significantly increase the number of women in municipal government. Though AKP does not have

quotas, it will put forward more female candidates than previously with the intention of increasing the number of female mayors from 2 to 10 and municipal council members from 1.5 percent to 15 percent. Tanriverdi said AKP recently demonstrated its commitment to the issue by conducting a political training seminar in 22 provinces for women from any political party. Approximately one-quarter of the 4,000 attendees were from parties other than AKP.

14. (C) Parliament legal expert Seref Iba told us AKP would sweep local elections, citing a September survey conducted by Ankara-based Metropoll that showed slightly more than 50 percent of Turks would vote for AKP if parliamentary elections were held today. Iba said AKP is planning to capitalize on its large majority in parliament by keeping approximately 200 of its 339 MPs in Ankara -- enough to convene Parliament -- in order to free up as many as possible to campaign in their home districts. Metropoll director Ozer Sencar believes that if the current trend continues, "AKP may reach 60 percent in the local elections." Sencar told us the Constitutional Court's ruling to not close AKP had increased Turks' optimism. In the September survey, 49.1 percent of respondents said they believe Turkey is heading in the right direction, as opposed to 38.6 at the outset of the closure case in March. The desire for economic stability is largely responsible for the change, according to Sencar, who noted, "Turks considered the closure case as a destabilizing factor for the economy. People want stability, not crisis."

Ever Cognizant Of Elections, AKP To Proceed With Caution

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15. (C) Sahin told us the GOT will focus on addressing economic and public works issues in the lead-up to elections. Tackling important but less controversial issues such as monetary policy and trade law would allow the party to maintain focus on increasing its margin of victory in the elections, Sahin thought. AKP MP Yasar Yakis, Chairman of Parliament's EU Harmonization Committee, told us AKP will implement reforms under the EU umbrella. The Constitutional Court closure case had taught AKP that focusing on single hot-button issues, such as the headscarf, would draw attacks from opposition parties and create suspicion of AKP's intentions. Tying reforms to the EU process will demonstrate AKP's commitment to making changes for the benefit of all Turks. Iba said he expects PM Erdogan to take small steps "within the boundaries of the system." Erdogan's recent public criticism of AKP MP Edibe Sozen after press reported Sozen was preparing a draft law to require purchasers of pornography to be registered in a government database demonstrated Erdogan "got the court's message."

Opposition Seeks to Discredit AKP

16. (C) Opposition politicians in recent weeks have seized opportunities to accuse AKP of corruption. CHP leaders chastised AKP founding member and current MP Saban Disli for allegedly accepting a bribe of \$1 million to manipulate zoning rule for personal profit. Disli denied the charges but ultimately resigned his party post as foreign relations vice chairman. CHP whip Hakki Suha Okay called the move insincere unless Disli gives up the shield of parliamentary immunity by resigning from parliament. Speaking to the press, Erdogan claimed he rejected Disli's request to resign from Parliament and AKP. In another incident, CHP filed a court case accusing Asim Guzelbey, the AKP mayor of the southeastern city of Gaziantep, of accepting YTL 700,000 (approximately \$570,000) to change zoning rules to allow for business development. CHP has also criticized State Minister for Foreign Trade Kursat Tuzmen of having extramarital relations with a Russian supermodel and for his outspoken trade threats against Russia that government spokesperson Cemil Cicek immediately retracted.

¶17. (C) Most recently, CHP and MHP leaders have censured Erdogan for his angry comments to Aydin Dogan, Turkey's most powerful media magnate. The Erdogan-Dogan spat was triggered by the Dogan Media Group's coverage on September 4-5 of allegations that an indictment by the German authorities against a German-based charity called Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) implicated Erdogan. The media coverage suggested that Erdogan had received funds from the organization and that Turkey had applied political pressure to try to persuade the German authorities to release the accused from custody. On September 6, Erdogan delivered a furious public warning to the Dogan Group, denying he knew the accused and threatening to reveal details of what he alleged were the Dogan Group's own illegal activities unless it ceased publishing articles linking him to the scandal. He also claimed that the Dogan Group was seeking revenge for his refusal to use his influence to change the zoning designation of land around Istanbul's Hilton Hotel, which the Dogan Group purchased for \$255.5 million in 2006, in order to allow it to be developed. Dogan denied the claims. CHP's Deniz Baykal called on Erdogan to explain whether he knows the suspects and whether he has received any funds from the charity. MHP's Bahceli criticized Erdogan for "resorting to blackmail in panic in a bid to silence press reports about the irregularities."

¶18. (C) While CHP and MHP hyped the corruption charges, the parties refused to grant leadership-level appointments to FM Babacan to discuss AKP's Third National Program, a 400-page document outlining AKP's EU harmonization plans, including amendment of 131 laws and 242 pieces of secondary legislation. One law in the Program would establish a parliamentary "political ethics commission" aimed at increasing the transparency and accountability of MPs with respect to their commercial activities. Speaking to the press, Babacan accused the two parties of manipulating the EU harmonization process for political gain. Babacan was left

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to pitch the program to Democratic Left Party (DSP) leader Zeki Sezer and Democratic Society Party (DTP) Ahmet Turk.

Whispers of a Cabinet Reshuffle

¶19. (C) Ankara is rife with speculation that PM Erdogan will reshuffle his cabinet soon. Iba believes Erdogan will replace five to eight ministers before parliament convenes on October 5. To help silence criticism of corruption and demonstrate his secular bona fides, Erdogan will increase the number of women in his cabinet and remove ministers seen as ineffective, corrupt, or overly Islamist, he predicted. Islamist-leaning "Zaman" wrote that Erdogan "plans an extensive reshuffle," and will create a new state minister position for EU Chief negotiator to address EU complaints over FM Babacan's inability to focus adequately on EU accession and his duties as foreign minister concurrently. The paper tipped Karaman MP Lutfi Elvan and AKP vice-chairman Egemen Bagis as leading candidates for the post. Leftist-nationalist "Cumhuriyet" reported Erdogan is expected to replace Nimet Cubukcu (Women's Affairs), Kursad Tuzmen (Foreign Trade), Huseyin Celik (Education), Faruk Ozak (Housing and Public Works) and Ertugrul Gunay (Culture and Tourism).

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